

HABS
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TOWN OF KISTLER
Refractories Company Town
Kistler
Mifflin County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5976

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HABS
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TOWN OF KISTLER Refractories Company Town

HABS No. PA-5976

Location: Mifflin County, Pennsylvania

Brickyard
construction: 1911-12, closed 1990

Town
construction: 1916-17

Designers: John Nolen, town plan
Mann and MacNeille, houses

Significance: Kistler was built by the Mount Union Refractories Company to house workers for its plant on the opposite side of the Juniata River in Huntingdon County (HAER No. PA-5974). The company distinguished itself from others in the region by hiring nationally known town planner John Nolen and the New York architectural team of Mann and MacNeille to design Kistler as a model company town. Although the public buildings on the town green are gone, the town plan and most of the town's original claboard and shingle-clad houses remain intact.

Project
Information: The results of the study of refractory brickyards and towns was published in 1993: Kim E. Wallace, Brickyard Towns: A History of Refractories Industry Communities in South-Central Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: America's Industrial Heritage Project and Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record, National Park Service).

The contents of this publication were transmitted to the Library of Congress in report form. See additional information on the refractories industry under HABS No. PA-5973, Refractories Company Towns, Mt. Union, Huntingdon County, Pennsylvania. Research notes, field photos and copies of historic photos collected during the project were transmitted to the AIHP Collection, Special Collections, Stapleton Library, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA 15705.

History

This refractories company went to unusual lengths to provide an uplifting environment for its workers. In 1916, four years after its plant opened, Mt. Union Refractories began construction of a company town. Instead of assigning the task to company carpenters and engineers or hiring a local contractor to build rows of utilitarian vernacular houses, the company commissioned John Nolen, a prominent landscape architect and planner, to design a model "industrial village." Mann and MacNeill, a New York architectural firm experienced in the field of industrial housing, provided the building designs. Company president Clinton V. Hackman "wanted to see his men live on as high a plane as their incomes would allow,"¹ and perhaps as ex-Harbison-Walker employees, he and R. P. M. Davis wanted their residential property to stand out as a distinctive cut above the ordinary company housing of their former employer and of their industry in general.

Their choice of planner assured them of receiving a design that was not only stylistically fashionable but also one that was accompanied by an intellectually rationalized social purpose. Nolen made a career of designing and writing about model towns. The town Hackman and Davis named Kistler was a minor assignment in a long list of commissions for municipalities, individuals, and institutions as well as companies. Nevertheless, Nolen included a chapter on Kistler in a collection of his essays. He described the triangular-shaped town site as bounded on one side by the Pennsylvania Railroad and separated from the "dirt, dust, and noise" of the works by the Juniata River on another. A brick farmhouse and barn already on the site were incorporated into the plan. The Pennsylvania bank barn was remodelled to serve as the community building on Kistler Green, a focal point of the asymmetrical plan.

Nolen's plan included four other public buildings spaced across the center of the village plan--two churches, a railroad station, and a store.² Only one of these was built, however, a combination store, school, and residence sited along the state road across Kistler Green from the community building. It was demolished in 1990. Like the barn with its cupola and Palladian windows, the store/school was given colonial-revival details, but even more than the barn/community building, it had the

¹"Company town of Kistler" The Valley Log (May 9, 1990), 18.

²John Nolen, "A Village for Factory Workers" in New Towns for Old: Achievements in Civic Improvement in Some American Small Towns and Neighborhoods (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1927), 66-69. Mulvihill, 14-15, 36.

proportions and stylistic composition of a vernacular building. Perhaps the local contractor was instructed to combine several functions in one building and created this building with stylistic elements inspired by the architects' plans for those that were not built. It did resemble Mann and MacNeill's design for other large-scale buildings, but their usual colonial symmetry and textbook design elements were compromised in this building by such things as the open bracketed cornice, window sizes and placement, and an awkwardly executed central entrance.

Although Nolen's overall street plan was carried out, there were additional discrepancies between the residences on the plan and in the village as it was built. Of the 111 residences recorded in Kistler in 1919 by the Sanborn Map Company, ten were designed to house four families, twenty-one were double houses, and eighty were single-family houses. The four-family buildings did not appear on the Nolen plan. They were set apart at the southern end of the village and were torn down in the 1930s. Conversely, his plan does show six multi-family residences on Walnut Street that were not built.³

The placement of double and single-family houses did not follow Nolen's recommendations, but their forms appear to be consistent with the six Mann and MacNeill designs listed in the plan's key. There were three designs for double houses, and three for one-and-a-half-story, single-family houses. The "Double Valley Farmhouse" is a two-story building with a square plan, pyramid roof, and side entrance porches. The "Double Mountain House" is rectangular in plan with a side-gable roof, shed roof dormer, and front entrance porches. The "Double Capri Villa" has a two-story rectangular plan, hipped roof, and side entrance porches. The "Georgian Cottage" is one-and-a-half-story, L-shaped in plan, with a side-gable roof that extends over a full-width porch and central entrance. The "Vermont Farmhouse" has a rectangular plan, gambrel roof, a central entrance, and a stoop with either a segmental- or pediment-arched roof. The "Norman Cottage" is rectangular in plan with a front projecting bay and a front-gable roof that extends over a side entrance porch. On the Nolen plan these house types were arranged in symmetrical groups. As built they have a more random placement, although they also tend to be grouped in rows of the same plan.⁴

³Nolen, 68. "Kistler" in Mt. Union (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1919).

⁴Ibid. Nancy S. Shedd et al., Huntingdon County, Pennsylvania: An Inventory of Historic Engineering and Industrial Sites (Washington, D. C.: Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record, National Park Service, 1991), 137.

Nolen's and his architects' design philosophy was based on the belief "that housing is something more than an incident in the life of the worker." Informed civic planning and "suitable and healthful homes" could help "to cultivate a spirit of citizenship and social life among the inhabitants." This was especially important in Kistler, Nolen wrote:

The population being so largely foreign in its make-up, there is distinct necessity for a lead to be given in the direction of Americanism. This is done in a much better way than by exhortation--by the provision of something tangible, in the form of good living conditions, which more nearly express the ideals of this country.⁵

The housing for refractories workers at Kistler aspired to a higher standard of living by the inclusion of indoor plumbing and bathrooms and a more formal, middle-class floor plan that included both a living room and dining room as well as a kitchen on the first floor. The scale of many of the houses was sometimes so small, however, that the space designated as the dining room was not large enough for a dining room table, and with children and boarders, the residents' needs for living and sleeping space often dictated more practical uses of any extra rooms.⁶ The houses were dressed up in colonial-revival and vernacular styles to convey the values of steady, upright Americanism. The six house plans were given names such as Vermont Farmhouse and Norman Cottage that evoked a romantically rustic and noble work ethic heritage far removed from any association with the urban, industrial world.

This physical framework for redeeming social and home life was complemented by educational and social welfare programs documented in a set of photographs taken in Kistler about 1920. The photographs show street views and buildings, garden plots, and children in the playground on Kistler Green. A store and school were housed in the village's second public building located along the state road across the green from the community building. There are photographs of grade school age children in a classroom setting and of adult women in what appear to be sewing and knitting classes. Another shows a nurse attending to an African-American family's infant, and in another, young girls practice nursing skills. The company employed several women as

⁵Nolen, 73-74. Kistler's "foreign" residents, like Mt. Union's, included East European immigrants and African-Americans recruited from the area around Saluda, South Carolina. Although no strict segregation was reported in Kistler, most of the African-American families lived on Pine Street. Mary Alexander, interview by Margaret Mulrooney, Kistler, Pa., March 29, 1989. Ressie Costlow, interview by Margaret Mulrooney, Kistler, Pa., March 30, 1989.

⁶Mary Alexander, interview by author, Kistler, Pa., June 11, 1991.

teachers and as nurses for the community and the brickyard. They and other single women who worked in the company office lived in the "girls' club house," a double house on Cedar Street.⁷

It is unclear whether these social programs and services lasted through the 1920s, but company oversight was certainly still active. By 1924 Wayne Township operated the Kistler school, renting the three large rooms on the second floor above the company store. There were plans to build a public school in Kistler in 1924, but U. S. Refractories' president R. P. M. Davis objected strongly to the school board's choice of a "portable, ready-made building." He did not think it "adequate or appropriate" for a town designed by renowned architects and landscaped with thousands of dollars of trees and shrubs so that it "will become more and more beautiful":

Kistler as a model town is famous--frequently letters are received from all over the United States and from different countries of Europe asking about the plans and the history of the town of Kistler. To erect a squatty, ready-made, ugly school building right in the center of Kistler would be a great misfortune.

To block the school, he had Kistler incorporated as a borough so that its school administration was separate from the township, and classes continued to be held in the company's building.⁸ A substantial brick school building was built at the end of Cedar Street in 1936 with the aid of the Works Progress Administration. The community building, which held a theater, poolroom, and dance hall, burned in 1933 and was not replaced. One resident reported that in its last years, she visited the building only for voter registration. The company store was sold in the early 1940s to George Sadasuk, and in 1944 the first two houses were sold, to residents Superintendent Edgar Kurtz and his brother-in-law, William Ray Hoenstine. The houses were all in private hands by 1949.⁹

The majority of the original houses have been remodeled in some way, with additions, enclosed porches, and aluminum or vinyl siding, but there are still a few, such as 95 Cedar Street, whose

⁷"Plan for Kistler," in Nolen, New Towns for Old. Map of Kistler in Mt. Union (Sanborn Map Company, 1919). Kistler photographs, Huntingdon County Historical Society. Margaret Fazenbaker, interview by Margaret Mulrooney, Kistler, Pa., March 31, 1989. Mary Alexander, interview by author, Kistler, Pa., June 11, 1991. Philomena Kurtz, interview by Margaret Mulrooney, Kistler, Pa., March 31, 1989.

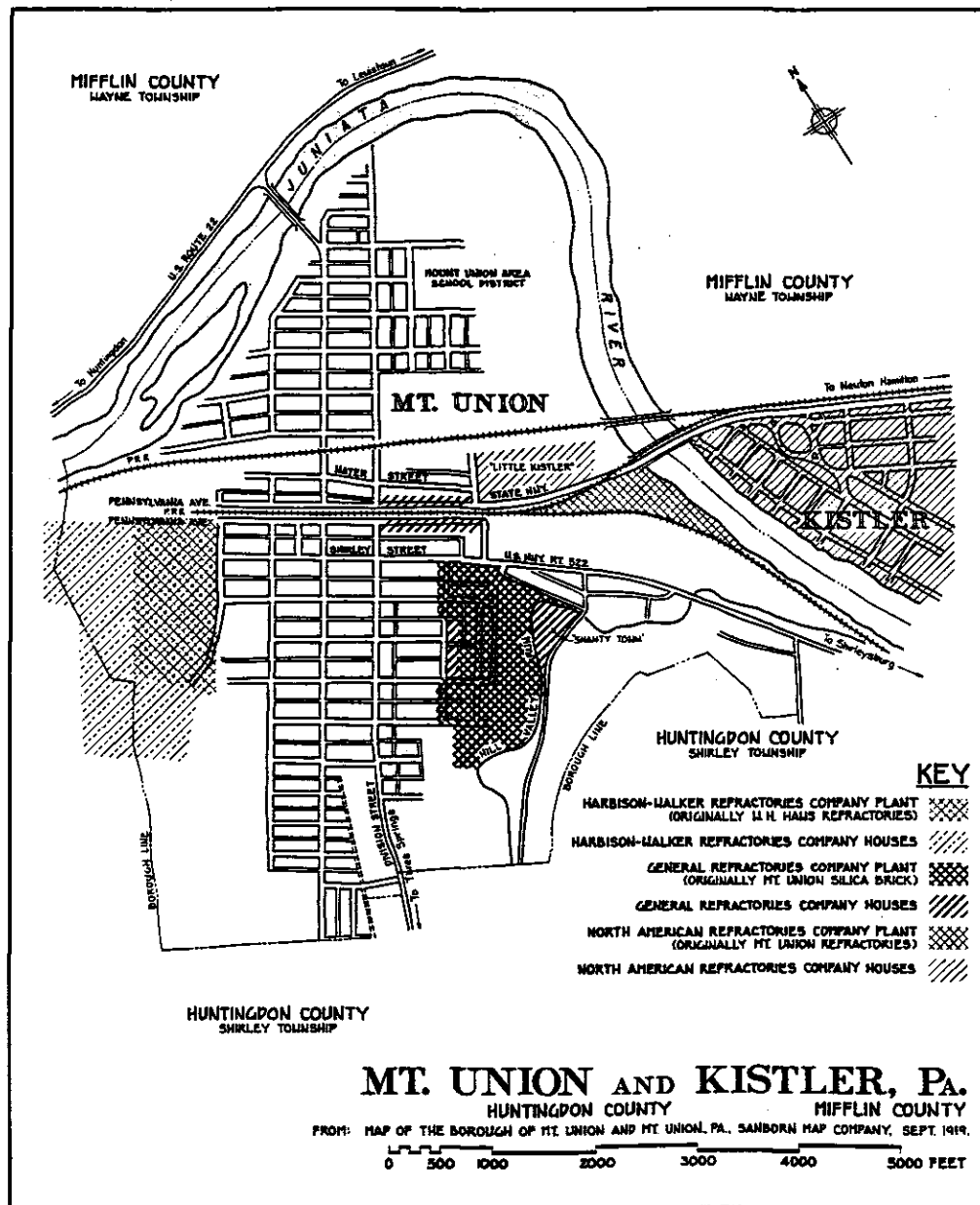
⁸"Kistler Will Become A Borough," Mt. Union Times (September 4, 1924).

⁹Shedd et al., 138-39. Tax assessment records, Wayne Township and Kistler, Mifflin County. Ressie Costlow, interview by Margaret Mulrooney, Kistler, Pa., March 30, 1989. Philomena Kurtz interview.

original shingle siding and white trim have been maintained. The small lot sizes have generally precluded ambitious expansion of houses or infill, although a few house trailers have been added to the town--one on Cedar Street, another on Pine Street and a few more on the corner plot at Riverside Drive and Birch Street where one house burned and another was torn down. In the 1970s the Kistler Volunteer Fire Company built a two-story, concrete-block fire hall in the center of town. It replaced a shed in which a pull-type fire engine was once kept. The 1936 school still serves as the Kistler elementary school. The mayor and council hold monthly meetings in the elementary school or the fire hall.¹⁰ The store building was vacant and deteriorated in the late 1980s and was demolished in 1990. A ranch house was built on the site. Several other ranch and split-level houses were built along Beaver Road where the quad houses once stood.

¹⁰"Kistler Hires New Secretary-Treasurer," The Daily News (February 17, 1989), 3.

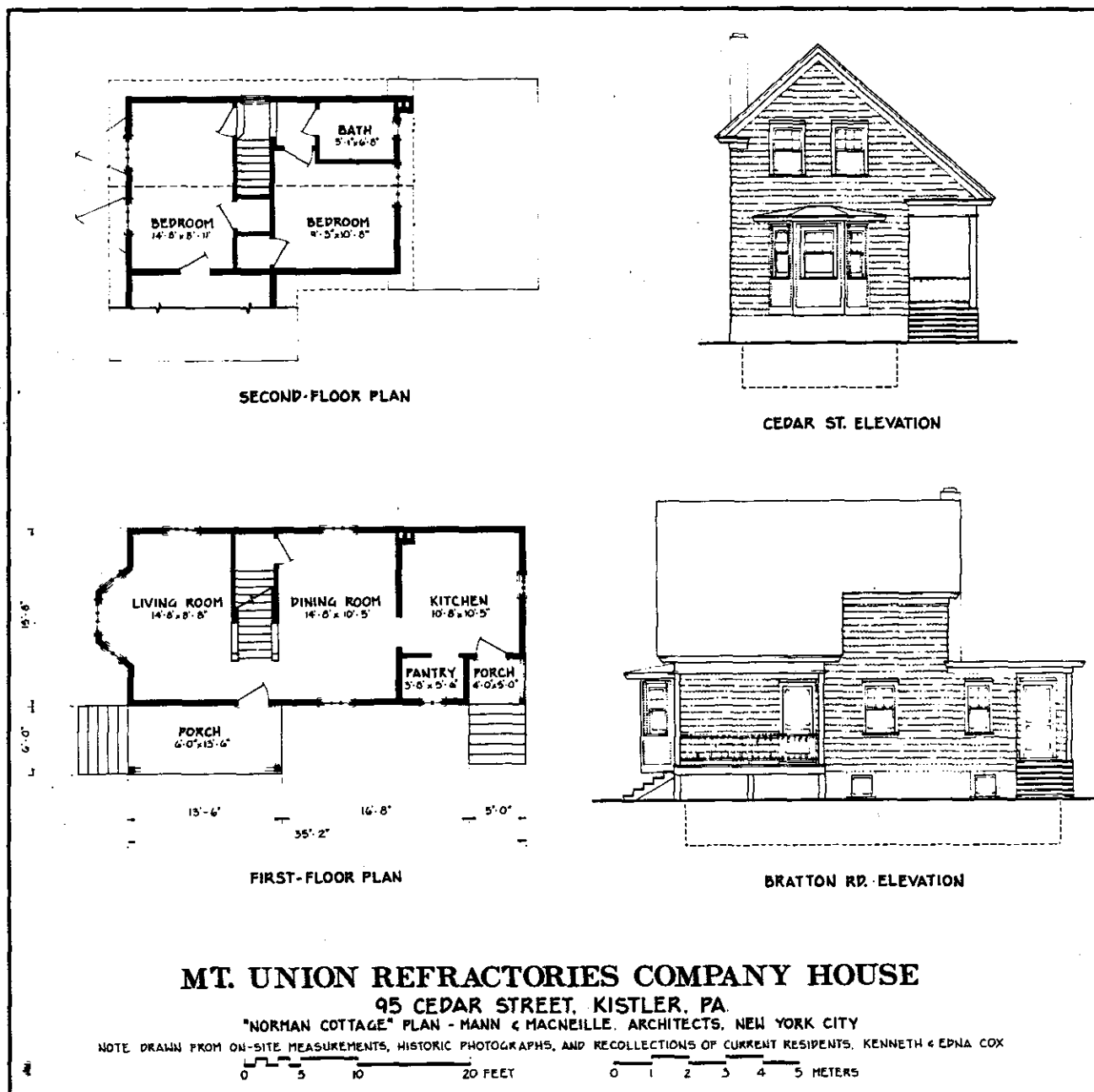
APPENDIX I



Map of Mt. Union and Kistler along the Juniata River.
Drawn by Isabel Yang.

Reproduced from Wallace, Kim E., Brickyard Towns: A History of Refractories Industry Communities in South-Central Pennsylvania 1993 (Washington, D.C.: America's Industrial Heritage Project and HABS/HAER, National Park Service).

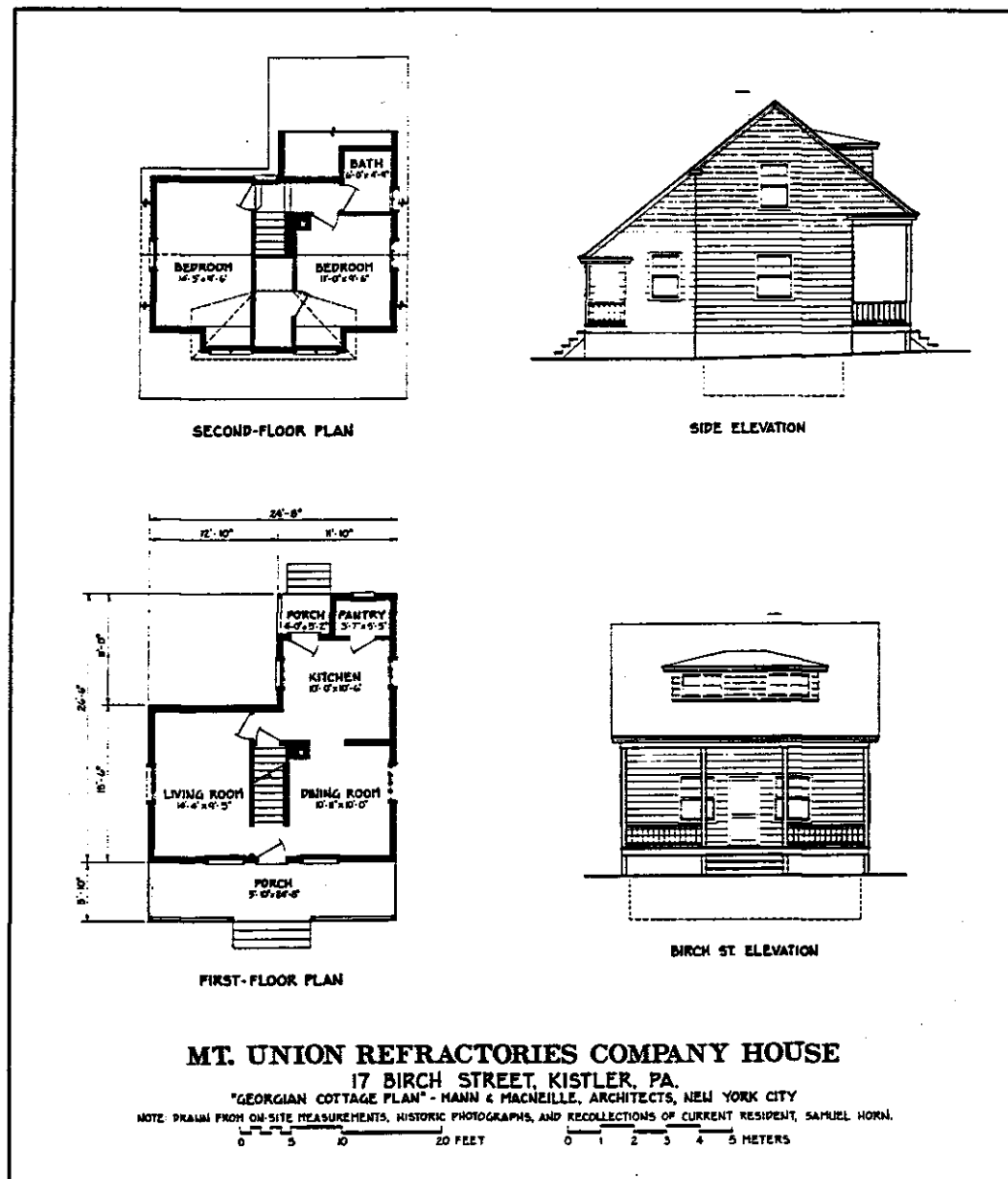
APPENDIX II



Plans and elevations of 95 Cedar Street, Kistler, a Norman Cottage style house. Drawn by Isabel Yang.

Reproduced from Wallace, Kim E., Brickyard Towns: A History of Refractories Industry Communities in South-Central Pennsylvania 1993 (Washington, D.C.: America's Industrial Heritage Project and HABS/HAER, National Park Service).

APPENDIX III



Floor plans and elevations, Mt. Union Refractories Company house, 17 Birch Street, Kistler. Drawn by Isabel Yang.

Reproduced from Wallace, Kim E., Brickyard Towns: A History of Refractories Industry Communities in South-Central Pennsylvania 1993 (Washington, D.C.: America's Industrial Heritage Project and HABS/HAER, National Park Service).